Individual Ability and Group Work

One of the common objections to group work is that bright, capable students are held back when they share group activities and grades with students of lesser ability. This is of concern to teachers and students. Often very good students strongly oppose group work. They worry that an ineffective group with weak or nonproductive members will compromise their grades. Many openly express the belief that they can do the activity, project, paper, or presentation better on their own and would prefer doing it that way. When bright, capable students with these concerns and beliefs are put into groups, they often compromise the group's effort by doing all (or most, or the most important parts) of the work themselves, and then they complain about having had to do all the work.

These issues raise interesting questions about forming groups: Should ability be a criterion used in forming groups? Should all the best students work together? Typically faculty form groups of students at different ability levels. But does this compromise what the best students can learn from the group experience?

Two very different studies looked at the role of ability across several different group learning outcomes. Ballantine and Larres (reference below) studied fourth-year accounting students. They formed groups that combined students who had achieved more than 60 percent in a previous course with students who had achieved less than 60 percent in the same course. With respect to the development of skills (such as leadership, verbal communication, ability to get along with others, negotiation, and persuasion), "the responses ... provide some level of assurance that students, irrespective of their ability, have enhanced their skills develop-

ment because of engaging in group-work in a cooperative learning environment." (p. 175) In other words, both able and less able students in the same group reported that their skills had developed. The researchers elaborate: "Both 'more able' and 'less able' students reported positive outcomes from the group assessment experience. There was only one difference in response, namely that the less able students felt that the group experience had contributed more to their academic improvement than their more able colleagues." (p. 178)

This study explored other issues as well, but the findings with respect to the impact of ability are notable for a couple of other reasons. First, the project these groups completed was large (spanning 11 weeks). Second, what the group produced was graded and everyone in the group received the same grade. There was no peer assessment or individual grade, and still group members reported skill development.
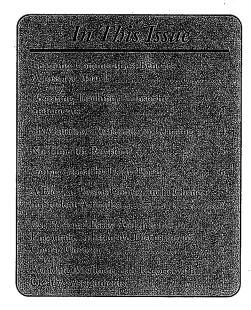
Camara, Carr, and Grota (reference below) also studied upper-division business students. In four sections of a required legal environment of business course, students were put into three- to six-person teams. Half of the teams had members with roughly the same GPA—high, low, or average. The other half were composed of members with significantly different GPAs. Students did not know that they were placed in groups based on their GPAs. Basically, the researchers wanted to know if there were significant differences between these two types of groups, and, if there were, whether they were reflected across ability levels. To ascertain whether there were differences, they looked at three different types of

data: student peer evaluations, group grades (on the work done collectively), and individual final exam grades.

Here is what they found: Students in both the homogenous (same GPA) and the heterogeneous (different GPAs) groups gave each other what the researchers describe as "inflated" peer evaluations, although the homogenous groups inflated them to a much lesser degree than the heterogeneous groups did. The differences in group grades between the two groups were not statistically significant, nor were the differences between the individual final grades. The researchers offer this overall conclusion: "Group work clearly is a positive experience for all students notwithstanding their individual GPA or previous level of performance." (p. 17)

As for the different ability levels within the homogeneous groups, "For low achievers, their individual work perfor-

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Going Global by Using Local

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The effort by academic institutions to meet the demands of an increasingly global and complex economic environment requires educating students to succeed in the worldwide marketplace. Although the proliferation of study abroad opportunities for both students and faculty and the expansion of partnering arrangements and visiting lectureships are positive developments, the current economic situation may put a damper on the ability of faculty, students, and institutions to participate in these endeavors. Thus, "going global by using local" may need to become the catchphrase for university internationalization. At-home internationalization engages students and faculty with international experiences and with international students and faculty in class discussions and curriculum development efforts. This local diversity can facilitate broader cultural understanding and provide benefits for everyone.

Internationalization of the classroom, however, does not occur accidentally. It begins with an instructor's desire to internationalize the curriculum and the classroom, and then uses careful planning and curricular structures to accomplish that goal. Early on, students must come to understand that global perspectives are relevant to the content of the course as well as to their future vocations. Creating an international classroom begins on day one, when class instructors let students know that *this* class will be different from any they have experienced previously. We start out with the following three simple rules that let students know where they stand and what is expected of them.

Rule One: Respect each others' opinions. This rule reinforces the polite culture of academia and reminds students that they are all part of the same academic community, regardless of their nationality or experiences.

Rule Two: Arguments are great fun, but argue the point, not the person. Anyone who personalizes the argument will be shut down immediately—and you should be prepared to step in and do so. This rule not only reinforces Rule One, it also signals to students that the teacher will take action if a student makes a personal attack. It also empowers international students to claim a bigger learning space and to become involved in discussions. Supportive conditions help non-English–speaking students overcome the hesitation of less-than-perfect verbal communication.

Rule Three: This has always been a loud and noisy classroom, and you shall keep it so! This rule grants permission for enthusiastic interaction among students as well as between students and the instructor.

These are simple rules that establish the parameters of appropriate cross-cultural communication. International stories are welcome in the classroom, but they must be told when they are relevant to the course content being considered.

Establishing an internationalized classroom also necessitates incorporating relevant learning outcomes and determining how those outcomes will be assessed. Regardless of class format, the goal is to create an open space for participation by all and for everyone to bring their (inter)national experiences to the class. All teaching styles can be adjusted, with minimal effort, to incorporate internationalization strategies. In the most traditional teaching format, the lecture, for example, faculty can emphasize certain learning points by highlighting personal international experiences. For instance, when clarifying the differences between authoritarian and democratic regimes, a personal story about travel documents in an authoritarian nation brings home lessons about not only the vulnerability of the traveler, but also the rights of citizens in different regimes.

Introducing the "real word" into the classroom demonstrates to students the relevance of global perspectives. It also breaks down the barriers between students and focuses their minds on the global impact of whatever the class might be studying. Achieving such results is rewarding for instructors and broadening for students, especially when one considers that the class has gone global by using local—the international experiences and expertise of those close at hand. 🌢

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mance levels are significantly elevated as a result of their HO [homogeneous] grouping." (p.17) There was also some evidence in the results that in the heterogeneous groups, students demonstrated higher levels of desirable group behaviors, which the researchers think happened because those students may have developed a greater appreciation of other group members.

Both of these studies explored a range of issues and used a variety of empirical analyses. Both looked at students within particular degree programs, which limits how widely the conclusions should be generalized, but these results do dispute the notion that group work hinders the development of able students. These findings also indicate the very powerful potential of group work to develop the skills and abilities of less able students.

Reference: Ballantine, J. and Larres, P. M. (2007). Final year accounting undergraduates' attitudes to group assessment and the role of learning logs. *Accounting Education*, 16 (2), 163-183.

Camara, J. E., Carr, B. N., and Grota, B. L. (2007). One approach to formulating and evaluating student work groups in legal environment of business courses. *Journal of Legal Studies Education*, 24 (1), 1-18. 🌢